Beyond the Rejection of Mahābrahmā: Reconsidering the Non-Anthropomorphic Creator in Early Buddhism

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Introduction

Modern scholarship often repeats the claim that Buddhism categorically rejects the notion of a creator. Yet a closer reading of the Pāli Canon reveals that the matter is far more nuanced. The Buddha does not dismiss outright the possibility of an uncreated, ultimate reality; instead, he rejects the Brahmanical doctrine of a *personal, anthropomorphic creator*—specifically the figure of Mahābrahmā, who appears in several early texts as a powerful but deluded being.

In *Brahmajāla Sutta* (Dīgha Nikāya 1) and *Brahmanimantanika Sutta* (Majjhima Nikāya 49), the Buddha analyzes the claim that Mahābrahmā is "the Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the Creator, the Father of all that has been and will be." But instead of endorsing or denying a creator in the abstract, the Buddha exposes the mistaken assumption underlying Mahābrahmā's self-proclamation. Mahābrahmā is portrayed as a being who, due to limited cosmic memory, mistakenly concludes he is the origin of the universe.

Thus, the Buddha's rejection is not metaphysical atheism. It is an epistemic critique of a specific, anthropomorphic, samsaric being mistakenly claiming cosmic authorship. In contrast, the Buddha affirms in *Udāna* 8.3 the existence of "the Unborn, Unbecome, Unmade, Unconditioned," without which liberation would be impossible. The presence of such passages suggests that early Buddhist thought allows for the presence of an ultimate, non-created reality—but never personified, never born, never acting through will or desire.

This article explores the Buddha's critique of Mahābrahmā; explains why he sometimes speaks of the world as having "no personal creator"; analyzes the philosophical implications of *Udāna* 8.3; and compares these concepts with Taoist metaphysics, Suhrawardi's Illuminationist emanationism, the non-anthropomorphic monotheism of *Surat al-Ikhlāṣ*, and the egalitarian, non-material nature of Islamic prayer.

Mahābrahmā in the Pāli Canon: A Powerful Being, Yet Anthropomorphic

In *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1), the Buddha explains how the belief in Mahābrahmā as the supreme creator arises. After a cosmic dissolution, only a few beings reappear in the Brahmā world. Mahābrahmā is the first among them. When other beings appear later, he mistakenly assumes they have come into existence through his will. The Pāli text describes:

"He is long-lived, beautiful, and resplendent. Having arisen alone after a long time, he sees other beings arise and thinks: 'I am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Creator of these beings.'" (DN 1, PTS D i 18–20)

Here, Mahābrahmā does not lie maliciously; he simply suffers from a cosmic misunderstanding. Because he does not recall his prior existence in earlier cosmic cycles, he assumes himself to be the First Cause. This narrative portrays Mahābrahmā not as a metaphysical absolute, but as a samsaric, conditioned being dependent on past karma.

The anthropomorphism of Mahābrahmā is not primarily physical but psychological: he can be confused, he can form erroneous beliefs, and he can make claims based on limited perception. In

Brahmanimantanika Sutta (MN 49, M i 330–339), Mahābrahmā even speaks in humanlike language, boasting of omniscience, only to be gently refuted by the Buddha, who demonstrates a wider epistemic scope.

The commentarial tradition, especially Buddhaghosa's *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, reinforces this interpretation. Buddhaghosa explains that Mahābrahmā, upon seeing only the beginning of a new cosmic cycle, mistakenly imagines himself as the eternal origin.

Thus, the Buddha's critique is not of "divinity" or "creatorhood" as such, but of the logical and epistemological inconsistencies of a *born* being claiming *unborn* status. A conditioned being cannot be the unconditioned.

Why the Buddha Says "The World Exists Through Its Own Causes"

Certain suttas appear to deny any creator outright. In *Lokasutta* (SN 12.48), the Buddha states:

"The world arises through conditions; with the cessation of conditions, the world ceases."

But here "world" (*loka*) refers to the constructed experiential world—"the world of the six senses"—not to an ontological universe. The Buddha is not making a cosmological claim but a phenomenological one. The arising and ceasing of the world described here pertains to perception, suffering, and the aggregates—not galaxies or atoms.

When the Buddha denies that "a creator deity" is responsible for the world, he does so to:

1. Refute Mahābrahmā's false claim of being the First Cause.
2. Undermine caste-based determinism grounded in divine will.
3. Direct attention toward dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) as the immediate explanation of experience.

Thus, the Buddha's denial is targeted, contextual, and pedagogical—not a blanket rejection of metaphysical ultimate reality.

The Non-Created Reality in Udāna 8.3

Udāna 8.3 is one of the most theologically significant passages in the Pāli Canon. It states:

"There is, monks, the Unborn (*ajāta*), the Unbecome (*abhūta*), the Unmade (*akata*), the Unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*).
If there were not the Unborn, the Unbecome, the Unmade, the Unconditioned,
then no escape could be proclaimed from the born, the become, the made, the conditioned."

This passage asserts that liberation (*Nibbāna*) presupposes the existence of a non-created reality. Without an unconditioned principle, everything would be bound to cyclical becoming without possible cessation.

The terms used here—*akata* (not made), *asaṅkhata* (not formed), *ajāta* (not born)—categorically distinguish this reality from Mahābrahmā, who is explicitly born (*jāta*) and conditioned (*saṅkhata*). Thus, early Buddhism does not deny an uncreated ground; it only insists that such a ground cannot be personified or anthropomorphized.

Modern scholars such as K.R. Norman, Walpola Rahula, Richard Gombrich, and Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda emphasize that *Udāna* 8.3 points to a transcendent, non-personal ultimate—neither a creator deity in the theistic sense nor a mere psychological state.

The Rejection of Material and Hierarchical Ritual

In *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (DN 2), the Buddha critiques Brahmanical rituals that rely on offerings, sacrifices, and transactions with divine beings. These rituals reinforce caste hierarchy and presume that spiritual success depends on material exchange with gods rather than ethical or meditative cultivation.

In *Assalāyana Sutta* (MN 93), the Buddha dismantles the notion that Brahmins possess intrinsic purity due to birth. He points out that even Brahmins are born from the womb like everyone else, and thus their claim to spiritual exclusivity is unfounded.

Buddha's rejection of ritual is therefore grounded in:

- A critique of unjust hierarchy
- A rejection of transactional religiosity
- An emphasis on inner cultivation (*bhāvanā*) rather than external offerings

This directly relates to his rejection of Mahābrahmā: a personal creator who can be influenced through offerings leads inevitably to a religion of barter, hierarchy, and caste privilege.

Parallels with Taoist and Illuminationist Thought

The *asaṅkhata* of *Udāna* 8.3 finds resonance in the Taoist conception of *Tao* in *Tao Te Ching*, described as:

"Unborn, unchanging, the source without source."

While historically independent, both traditions articulate an ultimate that is non-personal, beyond naming, and not a creator through willful action.

Similarly, Suhrawardi's *Light of Lights* (*Nūr al-Anwār*) in *Hikmat al-Ishrāq* is uncreated, self-sufficient, and the ontological ground of emanations—yet not anthropomorphic. The parallel lies in the idea of an ultimate that grounds existence without acting like a personal deity intervening in the world.

Comparison with Surat al-Ikhlāṣ and the Nature of Ṣalāh

Surat al-Ikhlāṣ provides one of the most radical statements of non-anthropomorphic monotheism:

"He is Allah, the One;
Allah, the Self-Sufficient;
He neither begets nor is begotten;
Nor is there anything comparable to Him."

This description—unborn, unbegetting, incomparable—aligns closely with the idea of *Udāna*'s Unborn/Unmade. God here is not a cosmic person with humanlike traits, but an absolute reality beyond likeness or form.

Ṣalāh (Islamic prayer), unlike Brahmanical rituals, requires no offering, sacrifice, or caste mediation. All humans stand equally before God, with no priestly caste controlling access. This ritual structure

mirrors the Buddhist emphasis on direct personal cultivation without intermediaries or material offerings.

Both traditions reject:

- hierarchical ritual
- transactional sacrifice
- caste-based access to the sacred

And both uphold:

- inner discipline
- ethical orientation
- non-material spirituality

Conclusion

Early Buddhism does not deny the possibility of a non-created reality. What the Buddha consistently rejects is the claim of a *born, conditioned, anthropomorphic being* to be the creator of the cosmos. Mahābrahmā is rejected not because the Buddha rejects the idea of an ultimate, but because Mahābrahmā fails the test of epistemology, ontology, and phenomenological consistency.

Through *Udāna* 8.3, the Buddha affirms that liberation requires the existence of an Unborn, Unmade, Unconditioned reality—one that cannot be equated with any being subject to samsara. This ultimate is non-personal, non-anthropomorphic, and not an agentive creator; yet it is real, foundational, and necessary.

Buddha's rejection of Brahmanical ritual stems from the same reasoning: ritualized hierarchy, material offerings, and caste privilege distort the path to liberation and reinforce illusions about divine transactions.

In comparison, Taoism, Suhrawardi's Illuminationism, *Surat al-Ikhlāṣ*, and the egalitarian nature of Islamic prayer all reveal convergent intuitions across world traditions about an absolute that is uncreated, incomparable, and beyond likeness.

Thus, revisiting the early Buddhist texts reveals that the Buddha did not close the door to the concept of ultimate reality. He only closed the door to *misconceptions* about ultimate reality—particularly those shaped by personality, birth, hierarchy, and cosmic egoism.

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